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The Predecessor who unexpectedly became [X] struggles to avoid the enemy

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The Predecessor who unexpectedly became [X] struggles to avoid the enemy

The First Chapter of Taishi Tsutsui's novel *We Never Learn: A Collection of*

Extraordinary Examples

Translated by Elliot Baik

Advised by Professor Peipei Qiu

Presented to the Chinese and Japanese Department

In fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Vassar College

Poughkeepsie, New York

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Reflection

I would like to acknowledge and thank my academic advisor Professor Peipei Qiu for enabling me to translate the first chapter of *We Never Learn: A Collection of Extraordinary Examples*, the light novel spin-off of the original manga series *We Never Learn* by Taishi Tsutsui that I have enjoyed since 2018. (Original Japanese of light novel spin-off: ぼくたちは勉強ができない : 非日常の例題集 // Bokutachi wa Benkyou ga Dekinai: Hinichijou no Reidaishuu). (Original Japanese of manga series: ぼくたちは勉強ができない // Bokutachi wa Benkyou ga Dekinai). Without her constant encouragement and feedback, this translation would not have been possible.

Note, this is not a translation of the manga series, *We Never Learn*, but a translation of its light novelization spin-off. The manga series is already being translated into English.

Originally, the goal for this translation project was to translate approximately half of the light novel spin-off Bokutachi wa Benkyou ga Dekinai: Hinichijou no Reidaishuu. 僕たちは勉強ができない : 非日常の例題集, or *We Never Learn: A Collection of Extraordinary Examples*. However, time management and pacing was more difficult than I anticipated and so the project was scaled down to translating the first chapter with as much quality as possible. My biggest goal I set out for in my translation is making sure the translation flowed well in English while staying faithful to the original Japanese text. I tried my best to preserve structure and grammar as much as I could to convey the style of writing of the author.

I chose to translate this light novel spin-off for several reasons. First and foremost was that I enjoyed the original manga series it is based off of. It is a charming romantic comedy series with characters with academic struggles that students will probably find relatable. During

my time studying abroad in Japan, I watched the animated version of this series as it came out fresh on Japanese television broadcasting. Secondly, this light novel at the time of purchase had not been translated yet. This spin-off is very recent having released just last year April 2019, so I was confident that no one had already circulated a translated version. Lastly, as opposed to a more traditional translation work like translating interviews, memoirs or the like, I wanted to translate a work with manga-elements because I had grown up with manga and anime. Furthermore, I wanted a greater understanding of the mindset and process that goes into translating manga and anime by doing my own translation of a work with these elements.

Some major challenges I have butted heads with throughout the course of the translation were honorifics, making sense of sentence structure and grammar and making it flow in English, and kanji in general. The first issue with honorifics was difficult for me because while some are easy enough to translate into English such as -san or -sensei, translating into Mr/Mrs/Ms and Professor respectively. Other honorifics like -chan or -kun are harder to find English equivalents. These honorifics were primarily seen in dialogue between friends or social hierarchy type relations, such an older person talking to a younger person. At any rate, these are commonly used as terms of affection or familiarity. I have opted to translate these honorifics where they were easy to convert to English like -san or -sensei, but have removed the ones that are more difficult in English like -kun or -chan. Hopefully by doing so, this makes it easier on English readers to follow.

Another challenge is making sure that translations made sense in English while trying to remain faithful to the original text. Oftentimes if one took a sentence and translated it literally word for word, the structure would feel backwards and convoluted in English. An example

would be when the three girls, Ogata, Takemoto, and Fumino comment on the similarity of appearance between Manatsu and Mafuyu:

「まなつちゃん、誰かに似てると思ったら ... 桐須先生だよ！」 [Manatsu-chan, darekani niteruto omottara ... Kirisu-sensei dayo!]

「なるほど、言われてみれば確かに」 [Naruhodo, iwaretemireba tashikani].

If a literal translation to this dialogue were made, it would read like the following:

“Manatsu-chan, someone you resemble if given thought ... it is Kirisu-sensei!”

“I understand, if you try saying it like that, certainly.”

I feel I don't need to belabor the awkwardness of this literal translation. The original dialogue simply had the girls commenting on how Kirisu Mafuyu, who had shrunk back into her child form and was now calling herself Manatsu, looked very similar to their teacher, Kirisu Mafuyu. With the context, it is possible to read and interpret this translation correctly, but it is definitely more difficult to do so in a very literal iteration. This was simply a random example I pulled from within my translation, but these kinds of issues I faced consistently when translating the novel into English. On top of understanding what the original text said, I had to take into consideration how I might portray these thoughts properly from the original Japanese text into English that makes grammatical and coherent sense. The dialogue I listed as an example before, I ultimately translated as follows:

“Manatsu, I've been thinking about who you look like, and you look like Ms. Kirisu!”

“Now that you say it, I do see the resemblance.”

I feel that with my translation, I have managed to keep the original spirit of the dialogue and put it into English that makes sense. Is it a perfect translation? Certainly not. I'm sure there are always improvements to be made in clarity.

The last challenge I faced is one that stems from my inexperience in reading Japanese texts, and that is the reading of kanji characters. A big reason why I was not able to translate more of the book was because of kanji slowing my reading speed down significantly, and therefore slowing down my translation. Every time I picked up my translation, I had to have an electronic Japanese dictionary open at all times to look up how to read a kanji and what it meant. Because of my kanji weakness, my reading speed was hampered, but once I knew how to read a sentence and know what each word meant, I was able to start the translation process. However, even though I had an electronic dictionary available to me, it was not necessarily a perfect solution as some kanji compounds would not be recognized as an entry in the dictionary. An example of this would be when Miharu is introduced into the story. She has an unusual speaking pattern relative to the other characters. She would start her sentences with four kanji compounds like in the following:

「邂逅相遇 ... 私は大学に行くところですが、唯我成り幸さんは？」

[kaikousouguu ... watashi wa daigaku ni ikutokoro desuga, yuiga nariyuki wa?]

The first word Miharu says [kaikousouguu] is not found within an electronic dictionary, so it was more difficult determining what she was trying to say. In these cases, I had to look up each kanji's individual meanings and determine the meaning that way. In this example, the first kanji that reads [kai] means 'unexpected meeting'. The second kanji [kou] also means 'meeting'. The third [sou] means 'mutual', and the final piece [guu] also means 'meeting'. Three of the four kanjis used in her expression meant 'meeting' in some aspect while one meant mutual. So based on each kanji's individual reading and meaning, I pieced together her four-kanji expression as meaning something to the effect of 'unexpected meeting', and thus I translated it accordingly as follows:

“What a coincidence meeting you here... I was on my way to college, but what about you, Yuiga Nariyuki?”

I handled Miharū’s dialogue like this, which is similar to the speaking quirk Mafuyu has, where she often starts a sentence with a word that describes her feelings or situation. Miharū was more difficult by comparison because her speaking quirks were often not found in a dictionary, and thus had to be pieced together through thorough kanji knowledge.

One of my biggest takeaways from working on this translation was that translation is not an easy endeavor. It seems easy on the outside, but it is a complicated matter. If you understand the Japanese grammar and understand English, then it should be easy to convert between the two like converting centimeters to inches, right? Unfortunately, language is not as universal as numbers are. There are many things to take into consideration such as who the audience is expected to be. Translating a book to be published and introduced into English for western audiences is different from translating on the spot for a high government official. The nuance in which you translate something can lead to vastly different interpretations of the same material. Furthermore, there are cultural aspects to clarify as an English speaker isn’t expected to have a full understanding of Japanese culture and vice versa. While I did not have to clarify too much into culture with this translation work, it should be a thought to keep in the back of one’s mind. Having gotten a sense of the kind of work ethic and effort put into translation by doing my own translation, I have gained a much better appreciation for the work translators put into making a foreign work available in English or into some other language.

Overall, I feel that this translation project has helped me gain a better understanding of Japanese grammatical structures and has improved my reading ability. While I translated, sometimes I had to look up grammar structures to remind myself of how they would be

interpreted in English, which helped reinforce basic grammar or teach me some of the more niche grammar points. And by spending lots of time analyzing a sentence's structure, figuring out what the subject was, and the verb was modifying helped to consolidate those points further. As an additional benefit to heavy scrutiny, it expanded my vocabulary. At the end of this translation project, I feel I can read a Japanese sentence and figure out its basic meaning.

Character Synopsis

Mafuyu Kirisu -

A guidance counselor in charge of the students attending Ichinose Academy. She is perceived to be an icy, unfeeling woman, but is actually quite gentle and thoughtful about her students' wellbeing and future. Mafuyu is the featured protagonist for this translated work.

Nariyuki Yuiga -

A third year student attending Ichinose Academy studying for his college entrance exams, and in order to earn the VIP scholarship offered by Ichinose Academy, he has taken on the task of tutoring Ichinose Academy's top two geniuses: Rizu Ogata and Fumino Furuhashi.

Rizu Ogata -

A third year student known as a mathematical genius by the student population at Ichinose Academy. Her academic goal after Ichinose is to study psychology, but she is terrible at reading Japanese literature. She is being tutored by Nariyuki in Japanese literature. Her father owns an udon restaurant.

Fumino Furuhashi -

A third year genius in Japanese literature at Ichinose Academy. However, she wants to study mathematics in university, but is terrible with numbers. She is being tutored by Nariyuki in mathematics.

Uruka Takemoto -

A third year swimming prodigy at Ichinose Academy. She wants to study abroad in America, so she is studying English. Despite her efforts, she gets poor grades in English. She is being tutored by Nariyuki in English.

Asumi Kominami -

An alumni from Ichinose Academy. Has failed the entrance exam into medical school, and so is studying for a re-examination. She is studying medicine and physics, but is not particularly talented at it according to her father. Nariyuki helps her out with her studies every once in a while.

Basic Premise of the original manga series

Nariyuki Yuiga is poor, and wants to go to college to help support his family, but cannot afford to go. So he is studying hard to be eligible for the VIP scholarship offered by his school, Ichinose Academy, that will allow him a full-ride to university. In order to be eligible for the scholarship, he has to tutor the top two geniuses in mathematics and literature: Rizu Ogata and Fumino Furuhashi in their opposite fields respectively. He has to tutor Rizu in literature and Fumino in mathematics. The catch is that whatever he teaches to these two does not seem to stick, and so they consistently fail their tests. The other characters Uruka Takemoto, Mafuyu Kirisu, and Asumi Kominami are introduced later in the story as extra people Nariyuki needs to help out in addition to his tutoring duties. Starting from the next page is my translation of the first chapter of Taishi Tsutsui's light novel, *We Never Learn: A Collection of Extraordinary Examples*.

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“Whew...” Mafuyu Kirisu let out a small sigh as she hit the enter key on her keyboard.

“Complete... It’s already gotten this late huh...” She gazed towards the clock facing before her and in that moment its hands showed that it was undeniably midnight. Enshrined on top of Mafuyu’s desk, her computer showed the quiz she made for the world history class she was in charge of. In addition to that, there was a wide assortment of paperwork and such that while she was organizing them, it became as late as it is now.

“What’s left now is to write the report, but for that I need to reference the documents I left behind ... I’ll just bring it with me to school tomorrow. Umm, what else...” Mafuyu was thinking on how to handle the rest of the work, but her mind wasn’t working.

“Ahh. No good huh. I haven’t been sleeping much recently, so it’s making it hard for me to think.” Mafuyu’s vision started to blur, and she stopped thinking.

“Tomorrow is a day off so as long as I take the documents with me tomorrow afternoon, it’ll be fine...As long as I sleep soundly, my fatigue will heal...” As Mafuyu murmurs this, she slowly staggers to her bed. However, on her way to bed, she remembered that she was thirsty.

“It’s important to drink a little bit of water before going to sleep, isn’t it? Hmm? Is something there?” Annoyed, Mafuyu dragged herself towards her refrigerator, and slowly checked her surroundings. She noticed many things; primarily trash, books scattered about on the floor, and other junk. The first person to come to mind was Nariyuki Yuiga. “When was the last time he helped clean up again?” thought Mafuyu. It should not have been long ago, but before she knew it, her apartment had once again become a pig sty. Or rather, compared to the state of her apartment from before, it could be said that this is cleaner. Probably. Maybe. Relatively speaking.

“Hmm?” For the time being, Mafuyu shelved the disastrous state of her room to the back of her mind as something shiny caught her eyes. It was a bottle filled with a clear, transparent

liquid. The room's light seemed to have reflected off of it. It was lying in the shadow of the garbage bag.

"What could this be, I wonder...?" She picked it up thinking about what to do with it but due to her sleepiness, she couldn't think clearly.

"Well, this'll do..." It was tightly sealed, and unopened. In which case, drinking from this bottle should not upset her stomach. Having thought that, Mafuyu opened the bottle and drank its contents.

"No...more..." said Mafuyu, having reached her limit and fell on top of her bed. It only took a few seconds before she blacked out.

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The Next Morning

"Nngh." Mafuyu woke up with a pleasant feeling. The physical fatigue she was feeling recently had completely vanished. Her body felt light and full of energy. Her eyes, shoulders, and back stiffness had also vanished. She felt many years younger as if she was a child again. Somehow, she noticed her bed was wider and more spacious than usual.

"Ha, ridiculous. As if that could be the case." Mafuyu chuckled to herself. She raised herself from bed, and as she did so, her pajamas slipped down from her shoulders.

"....?" My pajamas shouldn't be this loose, Mafuyu thought to herself. Her brows furrowed. It was then that Mafuyu finally noticed what had happened.

"Impossible...How...I've shrunk...?" She gazed down, and the wrinkles on her forehead creased more and more. Before her eyes, there was a certain palm that was awfully small and narrow, with short and cute fingers. Like that of a child's.

“This is my hand ... right...?” Mafuyu tried opening and closing her eyes, but nothing changed. The sight before her eyes was still the same, confirming that these were in fact her hands. Now that Mafuyu thought about it, when she was mumbling and talking to herself earlier, she did feel that she was talking with a higher pitched voice than usual.

“I-it can’t be...can it be...?” With a stiff smile, Mafuyu got off her bed and headed towards a mirror. The face reflected in the mirror showed bewilderment, and was consistent with the face in Mafuyu’s memory. However, it was one from 20 years ago from when she was a child.

“...” Mafuyu stared unblinkingly at her reflection in the mirror.

“...” She stopped staring at her reflection for a moment, rubbed her eyes and stared at her reflection in the mirror again.

“...” She tried closing her eyes for a moment, and opened them to stare at her reflection in the mirror again. No matter how many times she tried ‘resetting’, the image on the mirror did not change. She tried smiling, and the young girl in the mirror followed suit, copying Mafuyu’s stiff smile. Mafuyu dropped the smile. The young face in the mirror also turned serious. For the moment, Mafuyu continued to check that it was really her face reflected in the mirror and then nodded her head once.

“Conclusion... It seems I’m still stuck inside my dream...” After mumbling that with a vacant expression, she turned away from the mirror.

“I must have been more tired than I thought...Let’s go to sleep again...No, wait, I’m still in the middle of my sleep now, aren’t I... Actually, if I go to sleep inside my dream, then I should wake up from the dream, right?” While mumbling this to herself, Mafuyu turned to her bed. However, as she made her way to her bed, her pajama bottoms slipped down.

“Ah!” Mafuyu tripped on her pajama bottoms, and crashed face first into a garbage bag.

“Oww...” As she got up and covered the tip of her nose that turned a little red, she realized what she just said.

“Pain...? It can’t be. This, this isn’t a dream?” Slowly, Mafuyu pieced together her situation. The pain was a little too realistic for a dream... By this point, Mafuyu had no choice but to accept what had just happened.

“My body has reverted back to when I was a child ” An event like this seemed too fantastical to be real, but the reality was that her body had shrunk.

“H-how did this happen ... ?” Although she just now recognized the situation she was in, her doubts only increased.

“Hmm?” Something shiny caught Mafuyu’s eyes. From the window, the sunlight reflected the sky’s image off the bottle. It was the bottle Mafuyu had drank from just before she went to sleep. She stared at that bottle again; specifically, she stared at the label pasted on the bottle.

“Anti-aging medicine...?” Anti-aging...youth restoration.... Mafuyu had no words to describe this situation. Of course, if one says ‘anti-aging’, one would think it slows down the aging process, not literally revert one back to a child.

“Because of this medicine, my body has shrunk ...?” As of that present moment, that was all she could think about.

“Wait a moment, why was this lying around in the middle of the room?” Certainly, Mafuyu’s room is generally always messy no matter when. However, because it is like that, it should not have been there, and Mafuyu has no recollection of ever bringing something like that into her room.

“Ah” For a short moment, Mafuyu was glaring at the bottle, creasing her eyebrows together, when a certain scene flashed in her mind. It was during a drinking party after work.

— Kirisu-sensei is still young, so you wouldn't understand what it's like being old, right? Just like that, you become old! Really! Just! Like! That! That's why, while you're still young, you should do as much as you can! Huh, anti-aging, you say? Of course I haven't done anything like that! I'll give you this, so be sure to drink it! You can take it with the box!

I bought it online late at night! I haven't tried it but I heard from tv that it works really well! Depending on the person, there may be a chance of returning back to a child? Is what the program said! As if that could happen, haha! Still... that kind of result would give me confidence in the drink! Well, let me know what happens after you drink it, ok?

Because of Mafuyu's female senior's machine-gun-like talk, Mafuyu was forced to take the box from her senior. She could only catch a small glimpse inside the box, but she noticed now that there was an object that had a very similar design to the bottle. Because she missed her chance to refuse, she had no choice but to take it back with her.

“No way... did this really turn me back into a child?” Mafuyu held her head in disbelief. Whether this anti-aging medicine was the cause is unclear, but what is clear is that Mafuyu's body has shrunk. At any rate, it was necessary to find a solution. Although, as far as solutions to this strange situation are concerned, nothing easily came to mind.

“Luckily... today's my day off. For now, I won't go out today looking like this...and once tomorrow rolls around, I'll return back to normal hopefully.” For now, she cannot do anything about her appearance, but accept her current state.

“Maybe if I go back to sleep a second time, I'll turn back to normal.” After Mafuyu pulled her pajama bottoms up, she went back towards her bed again, gambling on that possibility

“Ugh!?” However, on her way to her bed, the papers spread out on top of her desk caught her eye, and her face stiffened sharply in sight of that.

“Careless! I have to take the materials needed for the report to school. The deadline is tomorrow!”

In Mafuyu’s mind, two choices came to mind. The first was to ignore the report deadline. The other was to take the documents to school in her shrunken state. She pondered between these two choices for a few moments.

... ○ ▲ ✕ ...

About an hour later. “For clothes...this’ll do somehow, won’t it?” There stood Mafuyu dressed in children’s clothing. As Mafuyu rummaged through her wardrobe, she wondered why she found the clothes she wore as a child in there. Or perhaps it was always there having gotten lost in the back of the wardrobe from when she moved. Despite her disorganized disposition, it proved to be unexpected good fortune.

“Decision made...Ok, let’s go.” Mafuyu went to the entrance while her small feet evaded the many garbage bags scattered about on the floor. In the end, the woman named Kirisu Mafuyu is a person that cannot be so irresponsible as to ignore her deadline, and shut herself in her room. Even if something happened to her body. Even if her body cannot move, she must bring the documents to school. That is the conclusion Mafuyu arrived at.

“Hnn...The door... is heavy...” She grabbed the doorknob and turned it. Rather, she pushed her weight into the door, opened it halfway, and pushed her body in through the gap. Somehow, she managed to open the door. After she got outside, she used her whole body to close and lock the door.

“Even just opening and closing the door is hard...” She let out a small sigh. She just got outside, and she was already feeling tired. However, this is really where it starts.

“As expected, what I can normally see is completely different with this body...” The height of her field of vision is half of what it normally is. Her commute route should feel familiar, but it felt like she was walking on a completely different road. While she vigorously checked her surroundings, she walked towards Ichinose academy.

“Hey there, little girl! What are you doing looking around like that?”

“Nn!?” An unexpected voice called out from her side, causing Mafuyu to jump up in surprise. She timidly turned her head towards the voice. *Takemoto, Furuhashi, and Ogata...* There stood three of the students she teaches. Right now, her students were much taller than her, and were looking down at Mafuyu with a lot of interest.

End...Impossible... This appearance in front of people I know... furthermore, these are my students who are seeing me like this... Her body froze, and she felt her dignity as a teacher crumbling away. However....

“H-huh? You’re frozen in place? Did I surprise ya by talking to you so suddenly? It’s ok! Big sis here isn’t a suspicious person!” The girl that came to talk to Mafuyu was Takemoto Uruka who hurriedly shook her hands back and forth in response to the strange situation.

“Uruka, doing that actually makes you look more suspicious.”

“‘I’m not suspicious!’ is what a suspicious person would say” said Furuhashi Fumino as she giggled at Uruka while Ogata Rizu made a comment to both of them.

“Ehh? You two are terrible! You’re making me look like a suspicious person!”

“Haha, it was just a joke! A joke!”

“I’m only saying what would be common sense.” The three were messing around, arguing with each other.

Huh...? Mafuyu was truly confused about the situation they were all in. *Do they not recognize me...?* Or did they make a secret agreement to not let her know? *Certainly, if one thought about it normally, something like somebody shrinking would not come to mind.* When she thought about that, she calmed down a bit.

“No, Takemoto, I’m ...”

“Huh? How do you know my name?” And like that, the calmness she just obtained shattered.

Error!...Force of habit...! She had to deceive her fast or else. She quickly gazed around, looking for some excuse. She found her savior on the bag Uruka was carrying.

“T-that’s because ... I ... I saw that!” She pointed at the test sheet she found sticking out from Uruka’s bag. On the name line was written “Takemoto Uruka”.

“Oh, that’s why? Wow, you can already read kanji?” Uruka seemed to take that explanation and opened her eyes in surprise.

“Because I’ve been... studying...”

Uruka hid her true feelings on the matter, and took a gentler tone with Mafuyu. “Mmm, great, great.”

“...” Uruka patted Mafuyu’s head, and she sullenly accepted it. She decided it would not be good to react to the head patting and look suspicious. (*Test sheet ... English quiz...*)

Wanting to escape reality, Mafuyu continued looking at the test sheet. *She’s made a lot of improvements on her test score...* As of now, Uruka does not see Mafuyu as her teacher.

However, Mafuyu understands the situation of why she wouldn’t. Before, her English grades

were catastrophic. But there was nothing bad about the grade on this test. If Uruka keeps this pace up and improves her grades, she'll reach whatever goal she wants sooner or later.

Is she really part of the struggling group? To the girls, the image of their teacher suddenly appeared in their heads. Then...

"By the way, are you by yourself? You're not with your mom or dad?" Fumino asked, crouching down to Mafuyu's level.

"...Huh?" Mafuyu replied. Fumino stared at Mafuyu's face and tilted her head to the side in confusion. "N-no... I'm alone..." For some reason, she felt danger incoming, and turned her face away when she answered.

"Are you on an errand or something?" Rizu asked next.

"Yes, something like that." I'm on an errand taking these documents to school! - as if she could say that! She wasn't lying.

"Wow~ how far are you going?" Uruka asked while still patting Mafuyu's head.

"T-that's..." Here, Mafuyu didn't know how to answer. If she answered them honestly about going to Ichinose Academy, how would they react? In any case, she had a feeling that the three would be coming with her regardless. If she could, she wanted to avoid being in contact with them for long. More than anything else, this situation would be bad for her heart if it continues, because they might find out who she truly is. When she thought that, she clammed up completely, worrying about what they would think of her.

"Say, could this really be ..." Uruka said

"A lost child?"

"Maybe?" The three girls looked at each other and seemed to have arrived at that conclusion.

“No, you’re wrong...”

“Don’t worry!” When Mafuyu tried to deny that, Uruka tightly hugged her. “We’ll be sure to help you find your mom and dad!”

“Are you hungry? Do you want some udon?” asked Rizu

“Right, do you want big sis here to tell you a fun story? Is what I would like to say, but it’ll be an improvised story I’m making up on the spot.” said Furuhashi

Each of the three said something different, smiling, all worried in their own way.

They’re all acting from their kindness, right? When Mafuyu thought about that, she couldn’t refuse their help. *Although, I can’t let them hold me here forever ...*

Alright, how should I escape, Mafuyu was thinking when Uruka asked,

“By the way, what’s your name?”

“Uh...” Again she didn’t know how to answer. “I’m Ma ... Manatsu...” She unconsciously blurted out a simple name.

“Manatsu, is it? I’m Uruka! ...wait, just a moment ago, you saw my name and knew it, right? But you don’t have to say anything formal like ‘Miss Takemoto’, instead call me casually ‘big sis Uruka’.” said Uruka smiling without any malice.

“I ... under...stand, big sis ... Uruka.” Strangely, trying to avoid suspicion, she called Uruka as she asked her to. She stuttered as expected, and looked in a way like a young child.

“I’m Rizu. Big sis Rizu.”

“Ok, big sis Rizu...” Because Rizu looked at her with a clear expectation, she responded to that expectation. Rizu looked satisfied.

“And I’m big sis Fumino!”

“Ok, big sis Fumino...” Likewise, she returned the same flat expression that Fumino gave.

Disgrace!....That I'm pretending to be a child! Even though she looked calm on the surface, Mafuyu gnashed her teeth from the humiliation.

“...?” She noticed Fumino was once again staring at her face. For a short while, Fumino’s eyes were fixed on Mafuyu’s face.

“...Aha!”

“!?”

Because she suddenly let out a loud voice, not only Mafuyu, but also Rizu and Uruka were startled in surprise.

“Oh, sorry for yelling all of a sudden, but I finally get it!” After putting both of her hands together apologizing, and with a refreshed expression, she turned her attention back to Mafuyu.

“Manatsu, I’ve been thinking about who you look like, and you look like Ms. Kirisu!”

“!?” Her words hit the matter straight on, and if this continued, Mafuyu’s heart would jump right out of her.

“Now that you say it, I do see the resemblance.”

“Doesn’t she feel like a tiny Ms. Kirisu?” Rizu and Uruka were nodding their heads, while Mafuyu’s heart was thumping furiously.

“Ah, Ms. Kirisu is our teacher from school.”

She thought her identity was revealed but when she looked towards Fumino, it seemed like she didn't know; she was just explaining who Kirisu-sensei was to her.

“She was the teacher in charge of teaching me and Ricchan. But, in the end, she was swapped out with another person. She was really strict...” In response, Mafuyu’s face quickly returned back to a cold calm expression.

“She was a cold person.” Mafuyu was not surprised. She already knew what they thought of her. Even if they think of her like that, she doesn’t care.

However.

That’s why...

“I thought like that in the past...” What she said next was something Mafuyu never thought of, thus Mafuyu slightly furrowed her brow. She thought this before. Using past tense to tell the story, in other words, things have changed now, haven’t they?

Fumino, Rizu, and Uruka put their heads together, and giggled to each other.

“But, for example, when I was having trouble before, there was a phone call that helped me. Well, I didn’t know how she knew I was having trouble, but I didn’t think sensei would help me. It deeply moved me how she really chased me down.”

“Me too ... Nariyu ... There was a certain person who told me I should rethink my opinion on sensei. It was said in a strict way, but she was probably thinking about our sakes. Moreover, we have things we’re poor at, and it might sound rude for me to say so, but it makes me feel better knowing she can be human sometimes.”

“As for me, I wasn’t really close with her to begin with, but somehow I thought she seemed unapproachable. But...she gave me advice when I got nervous before a conference, at the school festival, she wore a Full Pure costume and danced together with us. I was really surprised because it was so different from the image of her I had in my head.”

All three girls spoke about their own experiences. Afterward, the girls all looked at each other again, and laughed shyly at each other. On the side, Mafuyu gently put her hand on her chest.

... How surprising. To think that they thought of me like that. She thought for certain that they hated her. Of course, even now there's no way they like everything about her. Even so, it was certain there's a warm feeling rising within Mafuyu's chest.

"... Still, the longer you look at her, she really does resemble Ms. Kirisu, doesn't she?" Upon hearing Rizu's words, Mafuyu's nervousness rose up again. She looked towards Mafuyu over her glasses, seemingly interested in her, causing a cold sweat drop to flow down Mafuyu's cheek.

"Actually, it could be that Ms. Kirisu just became smaller!"

"I-impossible! There's no way that would happen!" Mafuyu reflexively retorted to Uruka's joke.

"That really seemed like Kirisu-sensei just now, that way of speaking." Haha, laughed Fumino whose smile cracked a bit.

G-grave....I'm dead. The amount of sweat dripping down Mafuyu's cheek visibly increased. While the three girls were observing her, the action Mafuyu chose was...

"That's ... goodbye!" She fled. She turned around and began to run...

"Oof?! She immediately ran into someone. There just happened to be someone in her path.

"I-I'm sorry..." she said. While holding her nose that was in a little pain, she looked up at who she ran into.

“Nn, be careful.” She saw yet another face she recognized. *Ms.Kominami...?! Kominami Asumi.* An alumni from Ichinose Academy, formerly Mafuyu’s student.

“You’re not injured? ... Wait.” She looked down at Mafuyu’s face, and a suspicious expression emerged. “...My Mafuyu sense is tingling, and you look a lot like her.” She took a step back, and Asumi murmured to herself.

“Right, right?!” Raising the tension, Uruka had caught up.

“So, that ...” Even her escape had failed, and Mafuyu’s mind was getting anxious.

“R-relative!” As soon as her mouth opened, that word flew out. “Because I’m Kirisu Mafuyu’s relative!” she argued vehemently, and everyone was blinking in surprise.

“...Ah.” everyone said simultaneously.

Afterwards, Fumino was the first to speak, “I see, a relative.” Fumino said while clapping her hands together.

“We should have thought about that possibility from the very beginning.” Their expressions did not change much, but Rizu looked like she understood as well.

“Haha, right.” Uruka laughed without a care.

Failure... Maybe I should have said this from the start... Remembering the nervousness she felt up until now, Mafuyu felt her effort was wasted.

“So, what are you all doing here anyway?” said Asumi who suddenly changed her expression while tilting her head.

“Manatsu ... she seems to be a lost child so we decided to protect her.” replied Rizu

“Hmm?” Asumi raised an eyebrow in response to Rizu’s answer, and looked down at Mafuyu again.

“Manatsu, is that ok with you?” Asumi asked Mafuyu in a voice that turned slightly gentle, and Mafuyu could only gulp and nod her head.

“Manatsu, you’re a lost child, right?” This time she shook her head back and forth. Her last resort then was to not say anything in response; otherwise, she’ll dig herself further into her own grave.

“It seems she’s not a lost child though?” Asumi turned her gaze away from Mafuyu and towards the other three girls.

“Huh? Then, did we jump the gun?” asked Fumino.

Gulp, Mafuyu returned Fumino’s words with just a silent nod.

“Is that so... We messed up.”

“Sorry! We were just in the way of your errand, weren’t we?” Rizu bowed her head, and Uruka gave a sheepish smile, scratching her cheeks.

“No...” Mafuyu shook her head, “Thank you for your concern.” She faced the three girls one by one in order, and expressed her gratitude with a small smile. These words truly came from her heart. Even to Mafuyu, she had no desire to refuse their consideration in the first place.

“Well then...I’ll take my leave.” She bowed her head deeply to the girls she taught, and turned back. This time, there was no one stopping her.

“See you later, Manatsu!”

“Take care.”

“Whenever you feel hungry, please come to Ogata’s Udon Restaurant!”

“Have a safe trip Manatsu ... ok?” Finally, she looked back just once and the scene she saw before her was Uruka was waving her hand vigorously, while Fumino waved her hands

more reservedly, Rizu had eyes that stood with an air of expectation in them, and Asumi picked up the ends of her skirt and bowed with courtesy.

...*Sigh*. For some reason, she found that sight funny somehow, and let out a small laugh as she turned back. To think the girls would take care of a child they just met like this, was a side Mafuyu didn't know about them.

... ○ ▲ ✕ ...

“Whew...” After she parted from the girls, Mafuyu took a break on a bench in a park halfway between her house and Ichinose Academy. It's the normal, everyday distance but traveling around on foot in a child's body is a little tough. If this was really a child's body, then it wouldn't mind things like fatigue and would continue to move around until it ran out of stamina, but this was not the case.

“... Still, just taking a break is boring.” Out of boredom, she swung her legs back and forth while looking around her. As she does so, she sees a woman walking toward her. Unexpectedly, that woman looked in Mafuyu's direction.

“Huh?” Just before that, Mafuyu quickly jumped into a bush behind the bench she was sitting on. Why? Because that woman was another person Mafuyu knew. Or rather, she knew her, but this wasn't the time or place.

Miharu!? The person there was Mafuyu's little sister, Kirisu Miharu.

Danger! If Miharu finds me, it'll be bad! At any rate, she won't accept an excuse like a relative since she knows what Mafuyu was like as a child. It would be worse than if a stranger had seen her since she'll see right through her excuse.

“Hmm, did I get it wrong? I felt like my big sister was here just now...” Miharu peeked through the bushes, and looked around curiously.

“I’m pretty sure it was around here?” While she looked around relentlessly, Miharu crept closer to the bush Mafuyu was hiding in.

Crap, crap, crap, crap! If Mafuyu makes any noise, Miharu will most likely come to check it out. All she can do now is hold her breath, and just pray she leaves.

“Big sister—? Are you here?” Unfortunately, however, Miharu was accurately heading towards the bush Mafuyu was hiding in.

God is dead ... Mafuyu has already given up. What would her loving little sister think when she sees her current appearance? Furthermore, this was the result of her carelessly drinking a suspicious drink. What kind of explanation will she give to her, Mafuyu was turning the gears in her head thinking through possibilities.

“Huh? Ms. Miharu, why are you in a place like this?” From the side, a boy talking to Miharu appeared.

Yuiga? He too was another one of Mafuyu’s students, Yuiga Nariyuki.

Misfortune...! Why was it that today of all days, I keep encountering people I know!?
Mafuyu felt like holding her head.

“What a coincidence meeting you here... I was on my way to college, but what about you, Yuiga Nariyuki?”

“Every now and again, I like to change it up, and study outside.”

“You’re working hard, I’m impressed.” Unaware of Mafuyu’s grief, the two continued their conversation.

“By the way, Yuiga Nariyuki, have you seen my big sister around here by any chance?”
Miharu asked while looking around her surroundings again.

“Ms. Kirisu? I’ve been here since morning, and I haven’t seen her.” said Nariyuki, tilting his head in confusion.

“Is that so...understood. I felt my big sister’s presence, but I suppose that was just my imagination.”

“Presence, you say.” said Nariyuki with a slightly strained smile to Miharu who said that with a straight face.

“Well then, I will be on my way. Good luck studying for your exams.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you.”

After exchanging parting words, Miharu left the park.

“...Whew.” Mafuyu took a short breath of relief. However, that too was brief.

“So...” Nariyuki pushed aside the bush, and both Mafuyu’s body and heart made a big jump. “How do I say this, because I saw that you hid as soon as you saw Miharu, I thought I should try and stop her...Was it ok for me to do so?”

Nariyuki scratched his cheek, and had a troubled expression on his face. He probably saw her situation, and decided to intervene - is what it seemed like to Mafuyu.

“Nn...?” Suddenly, Nariyuki’s expression changed to suspicion when he saw Mafuyu’s face.

“Could it be, Ms. Kirisu ... ?”

“Relative! I’m Kirisu Mafuyu’s relative!” Mafuyu shouted, intending to use the same excuse this time too.

“Ah ok. I guess that would be it, huh.” Needless to say, it seemed that somehow Nariyuki also accepted that excuse. Rather, she felt a little regret that she’s once again digging herself into the hole she made.

“Huh?... Then that means you’re also Miharu’s relative, right?” Nariyuki seemed to have no doubts about her words. He put his finger on his chin, and his eyebrows furrowed together.

“That would mean my interference was unneeded then...”

“N-no!” Mafuyu shook her head back and forth rapidly for it looked like Nariyuki regretted separating the two.

“Umm, that...request! Just now, Mafuyu... big sister Mafuyu, I’m in the middle of an errand for her! I must not get help from other relatives!” Somehow, she managed to come up with an appropriate excuse.

“I see. So that’s it.” Fortune! Nariyuki seemed to quickly believe her. While putting on a smiling expression, he crouched down.

“Would you mind telling me your name?”

“... Manatsu.” Answering the question while matching his line of sight, she ultimately decided to use this name. Simply put, because nothing else came to mind.

“Thanks for telling me, Manatsu. I’m Nariyuki. Yuiga Nariyuki.” Nariyuki’s words seem like they have slowed down.

I feel he’s used to dealing with small children... come to think of it, he has younger siblings. She remembered Nariyuki’s family situation written in her documents, and she understands this.

“Nariyuki... b-big... big brothe....” After that, Mafuyu attempted to address him like she did to Fumino and the others. *D-disgrace! ... Why is it that I feel several times more embarrassed than before!*” Having reached her limit, she couldn’t form her words properly.

“...Yuiga...” In the end, she couldn’t endure it any more, and decided to call him how she normally does.

“Yeah, that’s it.” Nariyuki didn’t seem to mind how she called him, and nodded with a smile. “By the way, Manatsu-chan, where are you going for your errand?” He asked while smiling.

“...Ichinose Academy.” There was a moment of hesitation, but she decided to tell him honestly. Simply because she couldn’t immediately think of an appropriate place. *Well, it’s ok if I tell this child.* That’s what she thought for one reason or another.

“Ichinose Academy?” Nariyuki tilted his head in response to Mafuyu’s words. “By the way, what exactly are you doing for your errand?”

“I’m going to pick up a necessary document from big sister Mafuyu’s desk.”

“You’re going to pick up a document... Ms. Kirisu, don’t be ridiculous.” said Nariyuki with a wry smile. “Don’t you think the other teachers would stop you?”

“Ah...” Careless. Regarding that point, Mafuyu had completely forgotten. Even if she calls herself as one of Mafuyu’s relatives, it’s not certain whether or not they will believe it’s really a request from her. Logically thinking, they would first get in touch with her. But because Mafuyu is there in a child’s body, there would be no way to confirm. Like this, Mafuyu’s mission has reached checkmate.

... ○ ▲ ✕ ...

A little time after her encounter with Nariyuki.

“You really saved me, thank you.” Mafuyu bowed her head to Nariyuki in front of Ichinose Academy’s school gates.

“Haha, you don’t have to be so formal.”

In the end, Nariyuki got the documents by saying: “Ms. Kirisu asked me to get those documents.” As expected, if it’s a student from the school, he wouldn’t be suspected as much. Additionally, it helped that he’s normally a serious and diligent student.

“Do you know the way back?”

“Yeah, I’m ok.”

“I see, be careful on your way back then.” Nariyuki lightly raised his hand, and turned away walking.

“...Whew.” As his back left her line of sight, Mafuyu turned her face down, and took a small breath. It was both from having obtained the documents safely, and from the fatigue coming to her. Even if the other things didn’t happen, just coming here with a child’s feet would have exhausted her. Furthermore, she wasted energy because of her chance meetings with her acquaintances.

Break... where can I take another break? It's tough... As she thinks that, her unsteady feet tried to take a step forward.

“Manatsu!” She raised her head from her name being called.

“... Yuiga?” As she said that, the person who crouched down and turned his back to her was Nariyuki.

“C’m on, get on.” He’s urging her as if this is natural.

“But you’ve already done so much for me ...”

“Haha, a child shouldn’t be so reserved. You’re tired, right?”

Somehow, it seemed like Nariyuki saw right through her. Because of her hesitation, Mafuyu stopped moving for a moment.

“...I’ll take your offer then.” In the end, however, she decided to let Nariyuki carry her on his back. To tell the truth, she thought their situation looked a little awkward, Nariyuki carrying her back home.

“Hup.” It looked like Nariyuki was used to these kinds of situations so after Mafuyu put her hands on his shoulders, he held her legs under his arms and stood up. It was as if Mafuyu’s weight was not an issue. *Normally, he doesn’t seem reliable, but in cases like this, he really is a boy.* To this shrunken body, his back felt bigger and even more reliable.

“Manatsu, can you tell me where your house is?”

“I’m staying at big sister Mafuyu’s house.” Without hesitating this time, she managed to make an excuse.

“Ah, is that so. If it’s sensei’s house, then I’ll be ok since I know the way.” Nariyuki nodded, and began to walk.

For the time being, Mafuyu was shaken side to side on Nariyuki’s back.

After a little hesitation, Mafuyu muttered the following word by word “Thank you... for taking care of everything and anything.”

“I’ve said it before but, a child doesn’t need to worry about being so polite.” Nariyuki replied while laughing. “Still, even though I can’t see your face right now, you really speak like Kirisu-sensei.” Following that statement mixed with a bitter smile, Mafuyu’s face stiffened with a start. *Careless... before I knew it, I started talking with my usual tone...*

Not only does he know about the room’s unorganized state, but when it comes to Nariyuki, Mafuyu has a habit of not being able to maintain her image in front of him, (compared to dealing with the other students). Even here, it has unintentionally come out.

“Manatsu, you must really like Kirisu-sensei. Even your tone of voice resembles hers.”

Of course, Nariyuki had already made his own interpretation.

“Y-yeah... that’s right...” She decided to go along with that to her benefit.

“...”

“...”

Afterwards, there was a brief moment of silence.

“... About big sister Mafuyu...” Without warning, Mafuyu started talking again. “What do you think of her?” She continued to let out those words, and after, she came back to her senses. *Foolish question!...Just what am I asking!?* Even to herself, she didn’t know why she asked that question.

“Ah, that, right now I...” Mafuyu got flustered and wanted to take her words back, but couldn’t form the words. It wasn’t that loud, and she wished her words to disappear in the wind, and were not heard.

“Ms. Kirisu huh...” However, to her misfortune, it seemed Nariyuki had heard her perfectly. “I think she’s a strict person” Even with that statement ... she felt no pain in her chest, or anything like that.

Mafuyu knew what he was thinking all too well because she’s the one looking after the students.

“Still... ah, that’s it. If you’re staying at Ms. Kirisu’s house, then you know right? She’s surprisingly careless and sloppy, right? Hey, hey, Manatsu?! Your nails are digging into my shoulders?!” Although, she couldn’t turn a blind eye to the terrible things he said unintentionally.

“Ahaha, sorry, sorry. Guess you’ll get mad if I say bad things about your beloved big sister, huh.” Again, Nariyuki’s voice was mixed with a forced laugh.

“Still, ... you can count me as part of the group, who likes Ms. Kirisu that is.”

“.....Huh?” Mafuyu’s brain froze from words she thought she’d never hear.

“Compared to perfect people, she has compassion. More than anything, ... she’s often mistaken as a cold person. The way she teaches is thoughtful, and she really cares for the students. That’s why I’m thankful for and respect Ms. Kirisu.” But, as he continued speaking, somehow, her brain started working again.

“A, ah, understood. So that’s what you mean.”

“Hm? What do you mean by that?”

“... Slip of the tongue. Don’t worry about it!” She replied, but Nariyuki seemed puzzled.

“Is that so? Oh, we’re here.” To have arrived back at her own home, it seemed too good to be true to Mafuyu.

“Many thanks for all your help, Yuiga.” She got off of Nariyuki’s back, and bowed to him.

“Don’t think anything of it. Oh, I’ll open the door for you.” He took the key from Mafuyu, and opened the door.

“Well then, Yuiga, see you again at scho ... Please come visit big sister Mafuyu again sometime.” She was about to say ‘see you again at school,’ but corrected herself.

“I’m looking forward to it.” She parted from Nariyuki, waving her small hands and stepped into her house.

“Whewwww. Fatigue. I’m tired.” She let out a deep sigh, and closed the door behind her. As she does so ... DUNNNN ... “Mgmm!?” This and that piled up at the front entrance made a loud noise while crashing down on Mafuyu.

“Mmm! Mmm!” The result: Mafuyu became buried in books and other things and could not move. If you looked from the side, it’s guaranteed that you’ve seen this scene from somewhere before. By the way, if you’re asking where, it’s exactly the same scene right now.

“Mmm!” *Creak*. Somehow, while she was desperately trying to escape, she felt the door open again.

“... I thought I’d go back home after I cleaned up the room inside.” rang Nariyuki’s voice.

“... Mmm!” In response, Mafuyu could only groan.

... ○ ▲ ✕ ...

“Alright, that should do it.” Nariyuki nodded his head in satisfaction, looking around the inside of the room he cleaned.

“Thanks ... Sorry for being a bother.”

“Haha, it’s not your fault though, right Manatsu?” Nariyuki faced Mafuyu and smiled but right after, that smile changed to a bitter one. “Besides, I’m used to this.”

“...” When he says that, Mafuyu could only quietly look away.

“Alright, Manatsu. If you drink this, it’ll be good for you.” A cup was presented in front of Mafuyu. “A milkshake. Milk and eggs will help you recover from exhaustion.” The smile on Nariyuki continued to feel forced as he held the cup.

“I went ahead and made this but... I serve this to my relatives’ kids so it should be ok?”. Nariyuki quietly mumbled. Of course, Mafuyu had absolutely no intention of complaining, but at the same time, she cannot complain in her current appearance.

“Thank you, I humbly receive.” She simply responded, took the cup and raised it to her mouth. He adjusted the sweetness to accomodate for a child. As he said, the milkshake coursed through her tired body.

“Alright, this time, I’m really going to go home.”

“Oh, be careful.”

“Yeah, thanks.” While he grabbed the doorknob with his right hand, Nariyuki looked back at Mafuyu and waved his left hand. “See you later, Manatsu.”

“... yeah.” Holding the milkshake in one hand, she saw him and his smile off until he disappeared. “... Now then.” Mafuyu put the cup down on top of the table, and looked down at her shrunken body again. “Predicament. ... what will I do if my body doesn’t return back to normal?” Mafuyu was on the floor down on all fours, feeling hopeless.

“...Hmm?” Her gaze lowered, and she suddenly saw a box on the floor. *I feel like I’ve seen this before...* She scrunched her eyebrows together and carefully thought about it, slowly going through her memory for one that matches. It was at a drinking party. Next to her, a female teacher coworker faced her, and talked non stop like a machine gun about anti-aging. A bell rang in her head when she remembered that. *That’s it ... This is that box I got from that time!* In short, this means that the culprit for this whole situation may be the medicine inside the box. It’s been a while since she saw this box inside of her room, but it’s likely buried somewhere in there. That must have been discovered from the last time Nariyuki cleaned her room.

“I wonder if I can find a hint on how to return to normal...” Clinging to that one glimmer of hope, she opened the box’s cover and checked its contents. Nariyuki had organized it so carefully, and there were two differently colored bottles methodically lined up. There was space for one bottle, and it might be the one Mafuyu drank from yesterday.

“... Hmm? ... Two types?” Her brows furrowed again, and Mafuyu took the different types of bottles out of the box one by one. She confirmed what was written on each bottle’s label. One of them was the same from this morning: “Anti-aging Medicine”. Furthermore, there was another one with “Anti Anti-aging Medicine” written on it.

“Anti, anti ...?” Her brows wrinkled further, and Mafuyu stared at that bottle. Below where it said “Anti Anti-aging Medicine”, there was a little fine print that said: “In the case that the Anti-aging Medicine was too effective, please drink this.” written in the instructions.

“Conjecture. If I drink this, I can go back to normal?...” Although, it is not explicitly stated that she will return back to normal. Depending on the case, she could not deny that there was a chance that her situation would get even worse than now. More than anything, because she has to try it once more, she recognizes the suspiciousness of the unidentifiable liquid, and sees that it’s necessary to drink it.

“... A gamble. But if there’s a possibility, then I have to try it.” She was worried for a while, but in the end, this was the conclusion Mafuyu came to. She popped the top off, and after a nervous gulp, she drank it all in one breath.

“There’s ... no change?” So far, it hasn’t caused her body discomfort. No ... just one.

“Fuwa...” She let out a yawn without thinking. “Drowsiness ... because I drank the medicine ... ?” Or perhaps it might be the day’s fatigue catching up to her ... at any rate, Mafuyu was overwhelmed by her drowsiness.

“No more...” Just barely, she changed out of her clothes and into her pajamas. [She couldn’t find any children’s clothing so she had a baggy look.

“Li ... mit...” Saying the exact same words from last night, she collapsed into bed. As expected, it only took a few seconds before Mafuyu left to go to the dream world.

... ○ ▲ ✕ ...

The next morning.

“Nnn...” In the morning sun, her eyelids twitched, and Mafuyu slowly opened her eyes. There were no bad feelings waking up.

“... somehow, I felt like I had a strange dream.” A dream where she was a child again. That strange thought remained inside her head. It’s as if that really happened.

“Hmph, outrageous. As if that could happen.” laughing scornfully. That’s right, it’s impossible. It should be impossible but ... Mafuyu looked around the clean state of her room, and her face twitched. Scattered on the floor were old children’s clothing, and on the table was an empty bottle, and a cup with a little milkshake left in it. She turned on the tv, and on the edge of the news program, the date was the day after her break.

“Is this... evidence...? That reality...?” she mumbled while holding her head that was now in disorder. But she can’t do that forever. The clock on the wall showed she didn’t have much time to linger on the situation before work started.

“... It seems I have no choice.” Mafuyu focused on the matter on hand, and started getting ready for work.

... ○ ▲ ✕ ...

She wore her usual suit, and as she passed through the school gates.

“Manatsu from yesterday was really cute!”

“Yeah, she was.” Mafuyu heard Uruka’s and Fumino’s conversation, who were walking in front of her. Rizu was also with them off to the side, nodding her head in agreement. *It seems what happened yesterday was real after all...* She came here, and even Mafuyu had to admit it. With the evidence up until now, it’s difficult to deny.

“Still, she had a really sharp look in her eyes. She’s so small yet the pressure coming off her was intense, right? It was as if she was really Ms. Kirisu!”

“Ahaha....” Fumino weakly smiled in response to Uruka’s words. On the side was Rizu, nodding her head in agreement.

“...Class is about to start. Are you ok talking so leisurely like this?”

“Hyaa?!” Uruka and Fumino both yelled out in surprise at the voice addressed to them. Rizu didn’t yell in surprise, but widened her eyes facing Mafuyu.

“T-that’s right! Excuse me–!” With an awkward smile, Uruka quickly ran away.

“Umm ... excuse me.”

“Excuse me.” While Fumino had a forced smile, Rizu was ... harder to understand, she seemed to be a little embarrassed. Both of them bowed their heads, and then chased after Uruka.

“Honestly...” While seeing the girls off from behind, Mafuyu crossed her arms. Her expression became the sharp look Uruka was talking about ... but that suddenly relaxed. Her mind was thinking about the girls who met yesterday’s ‘Manatsu-chan’.

“Oh? Ms. Kirisu, did something good happen to you? You look happy.” said Nariyuki.

“Delusion. It’s your imagination.” Tightening her expression, her face returned back to before.

“Really?”

“Besides, Manatsu was in your care yesterday, wasn’t she? I’ll also give my thanks for that.” She expressed her gratitude again to Nariyuki, who tilted his head down a little.

“No, it was nothing. But...” Nariyuki’s modest expression suddenly turned into a smile. “Please tell me the next time when Manatsu comes over to play.” That day will never come. Mafuyu had no intention of drinking that medicine again.

“When I see her again, I promise.” But.

“... ok.” Yesterday was an accidental meeting, that memory won’t change.

“When that time comes, I’ll let you play with her again.”. But, it wasn’t just bad things happening.

“Big brother Nariyuki.” She wanted to tease him, so she tried to call him like that. Even though she was too embarrassed to say it yesterday, she was able to say it now without hesitation.

“Huh...?”

“You’ll be late too if you don’t hurry.” Mafuyu started walking again, passing Nariyuki after catching him off guard. Nobody could see her mouth, but a small smile appeared on her lips.

ぼくたちは
勉強ができない
非日常の例題集

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「ふう……」

タンツとパソコンのエンターキーを叩き、桐須真冬は小さく息を吐いた。

「完成……随分と遅い時間になってしまったわね」

ふと目を向けた先、時計の針は既に深夜と言って差し支えない時刻を指し示している。

机の上に鎮座したパソコンの画面に表示されているのは、自身が担当する教科である世界史の小テストだ。他にも、細々とした事務処理などを片付けているうちにこんな時間になっってしまった形である。

「あとは報告書の作成だけれど、あれは置き忘れてきてしまった資料も参照する必要があるし……明日、学校に資料を取りに行つて……ええと……」

残った作業の算段について検討するも、イマイチ頭が働かない。

「……駄目ね。最近寝不足が続いていたし、流石に辛いわ」

視界がボヤけてきたところで、考えるのをやめることにする。

「明日は休日だし、資料を取りに行くだけなら午後からでも十分……ゆつくりと眠って日頃の疲れを癒しましょう……」

眩きながら、ややフラつく足取りでベッドに向かう。

しかし、その途中でふと喉の渴きを感じた。

「寝る前の水分補給は重要ね……何か、あったかしら……」

冷蔵庫まで足を運ぶのさえ億劫で、真冬はのろとした動作で周囲を見回す。

目につく物体は多い。主に、ゴミや床に散らばった本などが。自身の教え子である唯我成幸が、前回片付けてくれたのはいつだったろうか。割と最近だったはずだが、いつの間にかまたこの惨状となっていた。いや、これでも以前に比べれば小綺麗な状態と言えるはずだ。恐らく。たぶん。相対的に考えれば。

「ん……?」

部屋の惨状については一先ず棚上げしながら目を走らせていた真冬の視界に、何かキラリと光るものが映った。透明な液体で満たされた瓶だ。どうやら、部屋の照明を反射したらしい。ゴミ袋の陰に隠れるように転がっている。

「何だったかしら、これ……?」



拾って思案しようとするも、眠気で考えがまとまらない。
「まあ、ちょうどいいわ……」

幸いにして、未開封。ならば、お腹を壊すこともないだろう。
そう考えて、真冬は瓶を開封して中身を飲み干した。

「限……界……」

そして、ベッドの上に倒れこむ。

夢の世界に旅立つまでに、数秒も時間は要さなかった。

…○△X…

翌朝。

「んっ……」

目覚めは、快適な心地だった。

ここ最近ずっと纏わりついていた倦怠感が、すっかり消え去っている。活力に満ちた身体が、やたらと軽く感じられた。眼精疲労、肩や腰の凝りも無し。まるで、何歳も若返

ったかのような。心なしか、ベッドもいつもより広く感じるような気がした。
「ふっ……しように。何を馬鹿なことを考えているのかしら」

小さく苦笑して、真冬は身体を起こす。

同時に、肩から寝間着がずり落ちた。

「……？」

オーバーサイズというわけでもないのにこれはどういうことかと、眉根を寄せる。
そこで、ようやく気付いた。

「ぎねん……何か……小さい……よう、な……？」

視線を下ろし、ますます眉間の皺を深くする。

目の前にある手の平はやけに面積が狭く、指だつて短く可愛らしいものだ。
それこそ、子供のそのように。

「私の手……よね……？」

開閉を繰り返してみても、目の前のそれが確かに己の手であることを確認。

そういうえば……先程から呟いている独り言も、いつもより随分と甲高いし舌つ足らずな感じになっているような。

「ま、まさか……ね」

ぎこちない笑みを浮かべながらベッドを降り、鏡の前へと向かう。
困惑に彩られた顔立ち^{いろど}は、記憶にある自分のものと確かに一致していた。
ただし。

一致したのは、恐らく二十年近く前の……幼い頃の自分の顔と、であるが。

「……………」

鏡に映るそれを、思わずまじまじと見つめる。

「……………」

一旦視線を外し、目頭を揉んだ後でもう一度まじまじと見つめる。

「……………」

しばらく目を閉じてみた後、目を開けて再度まじまじと見つめる。

何度仕切り直そうと、鏡に映る姿は少しも変化しなかった。

口元に笑みを浮かべてみる。

鏡の中の幼い顔も、引き攀った笑みを浮かべた。

口元を元に戻す。



鏡の中の幼い顔も、真顔となった。

そんな風に、しばらく確認作業を続け……真冬は、一つ頷く。

「けつろん……どうやら、まだ夢の中にいるようね」

虚ろな表情でそう呟いてから、鏡から顔を背けた。

「思った以上に疲れていたのかしら……もう少し眠ることにしましょう……いえ、今が眠っている最中なのよね……夢の中で眠ると、逆に夢から覚められるかしら……？」

ブツブツと独りごちながら、ベッドの方に向かう。

しかしその途中で、ズルツと寝間着のボトムスがずり落ちて。

「あぶっ!!」

足を取られ、真冬はすっ転んで顔面からゴミ袋に突っこむこととなった。

「い、痛い……」

少し赤くなった鼻先を押さえて立ち上がりながら、自らの言葉にハツとする。

「どうつう……？ まさか……夢、じゃない……？」

実際のところ、真冬とて薄々気付いてはいたのだ。

夢にしては、あまりに感覚がリアルすぎる……と。

事ここに至っては、流石に認めざるをえなかった。

「身体が、幼い頃に戻っている……？」

ぶつちぎりにファンタジーな事象が、現実で自らの身体に発生しているのだと。

「な、なぜこんなことに……？」

もつとも、認めたところで疑問が増えるだけではあったが。

「ん……？」

そんな真冬の視界の端に、何かキラリと光るものが映った。窓から差しこむ太陽の光を反射した、空の瓶だ。眠る直前、喉を潤した飲み物が入っていた容器である。

真冬は、改めてまじまじとその瓶を……正確には、瓶に貼られたラベルを見つめた。

なぜなら、そこに。

「アンチエイジング薬……？」

そんな文言が記載されていたためである。

アンチエイジング……若返り。なんとも、この状況を示すに相応しい言葉ではないか。

無論、本来「アンチエイジング」とは老化を抑えることであり、決して文字通りに年齢を巻き戻すような事象を指すわけではないのだが。

「この薬のせいで、身体が縮んだ……？」

現状、心当たりといえはそれくらいしか思い浮かばなかった。

「というか……こんなもの、どうして部屋の中に転がっていたのかしら……？」

確かに真冬の部屋は、概ねいつでも散らかってはいる。しかしだからといって、持ちこんだ覚えのないものが勝手に出現するはずはない。

「……あつ」

しばし小さな眉間に皺を寄せながら瓶を睨^{にら}んでいた真冬だったが、ふとある場面が脳裏に蘇^{よみがえ}ってきた。それは、いつだったかの職場の飲み会の場。

——桐須先生は、まだお若いから実感がなくてしょうけれどね！ 老化なんて、あつという間よ！ ホント、あつ！ という間！ だからね、若いうちから対策しておかなくやいけないの！ ほら、アンチエイジングっていうの？ そういうの、あんまりやってないでしょ!? そうだ、これあげるから飲んでみなさい！ 箱ごと持ってたいていいわよ！

深夜の通販で、つい買っちゃったやつなだけどね！ 私もまだ試してないんだけど、凄く効くってテレビで言ってたから！ 人によっては子供に戻っちゃうかも？ なんて言ってたんだから！ うふふつ、そんなわけないわよね！ でもまあ、それだけ効果に自信

ありつてことでしょうね！ 今度、飲んだ効果を聞かせてね！

年上の女性教師から、そんなマシガントークと共に半ば以上無理矢理に渡された箱があったのだ。中身はチラリと確認した程度でしかなかったが、今日の前にあるものと同く似たデザインの瓶だったような気がする。断るタイミングを逸^いしたため、仕方なく帰って来たのだが……。

「まさか、本当に子供に戻る効果を持っていたというの……!？」

信じがたい思いで、真冬は頭を抱える。

果たして本当にこのアンチエイジング薬とやらが原因なのかは不明だが、事実として己の身体が縮んでいることは確かである。いずれにせよ、解決策を模索する必要があった。とはいえ、こんな異常事態に対する解決策などそうそう思いつくわけもなく。

「……幸い、今日は休日。とりあえず、今日一日は外に出ず様子を見ることにしましょう……明日になれば戻っているかもしれないし……」

結局、様子見という消極的対策を採用することしか出来なかった。

「二度寝すれば元に戻ったりしないかしら……」

その可能性に賭^かけ、ずり落ちたボトムスを引き上げてから改めてベッドに向かう真冬。

「……っ!？」

しかしその途中で机の上に広がった書類が目に入り、盛大に顔を引き攣らせた。
「うかつ……! 報告書のための資料を学校まで取りに行く必要があるんだったわ……!」
報告書の期限は明日……!

真冬の脳内に、二つの選択肢が浮かぶ。

一つ、報告書の締め切りを無視する。

二つ、この身体のまま資料を学園まで取りに行く。

頭を悩ませたのは、しかし数瞬の間だけのことであった。

…○△X…

小一時間後。

「服は、これでどうにかなったわね」

そこには、子供服に身を包んだ真冬の姿があった。

何かないかと洋服ダンスの中を引っ掻き回したところ、子供の頃に着ていた服がなぜか

入っているのを発見したのである。恐らく、引っ越しの際に紛れたまま洋服ダンスの奥で眠っていたのだろう。片付けられない性格が、思わぬところで幸いした形であった。

「けつだん……では、行きましょう」

床に多数転がるゴミ袋を小さな足で避けながら、玄関口へ。

結局のところ、桐須真冬という女性、は締め切りを無視して部屋に引き籠もっていられるほどに無責任ではられない性格の持ち主なのだった。たとえ、自身の身体に何が起きているいようとも。動けないというわけではないのだから、資料を取りに行くべき……それが、真冬の至った結論であった。

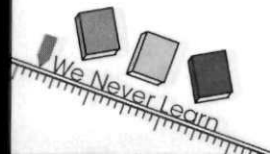
「ぐっ……ドアが、重い……」

ドアノブに手をかけ、回す。体重をかけて……というか半ばドアを身体で押し出すような形で、どうにか開いた。

外に出た後は身体全体を使ってドアを閉め、施錠。

「ドアの開け閉めも一苦勞ね……」

小さく溜め息を吐く。外に出るだけで、既にそこそこの疲労感であった。だが、もちろん本番はここからだ。



「やはり、この身体だといつとも見える景色が全く違うわね……」
視界の高さは、普段の半分程度。通い慣れた道のはずが、まるで見知らぬ街を歩いているかのように感じられた。

キョロキョロと周囲を見回しながら、一ノ瀬学園へと向かっていたところ。

「お嬢ちゃん、そんなにキョロキョロしてどうしたのかな？」

「っ!？」

不意に横合いから声をかけられ、真冬はビクツと身体を震わせる。

恐る恐る、声の方に顔を向けると。

(武元さん、古橋さん、緒方さん……)

そこには、自身の教え子たる三人が立っていた。

今は真冬より随分と高いところにある目で、興味深げに真冬を見下ろしている。

(終幕……まさか、この姿を知り合い……それも、生徒に見られるなんて……)

身体を硬直させたまま、真冬は己の教師としての威厳が崩れ去るのを感じた。

が、しかし。

「あ、あれ……? 固まっちゃった……? 急に話しかけたから、ビックリしちゃったか

な? 大丈夫、お姉ちゃん怪しい人じゃないよ?」

真冬に話しかけてきた少女、武元うるかが少し慌てた様子でバタバタと手を振る。

「うるかちゃん、それじゃホントに怪しい人みたいだよ」

「怪しくない、は怪しい者が使う常套句です」

うるかに対して、古橋文乃がクスクスと笑いながら、緒方理珠が真顔で、それぞれそん

な風にコメントを送った。

「ええっ!? 酷いよ二人共! それじゃあたしが不審者みたいじゃん!」

「あはは、冗談冗談」

「私は一般論を語ったまでですが」

三人は、じゃれ合うようなやり取りを交わす。

(あれ……?)

そんな彼女たちの様子に、真冬は内心で首を捻った。

(私だと気付かれていない……の、かしら……?)

それから、密かに納得する。

(確かに、普通に考えれば身体が縮んだなんて思いもしないか)



そう考えると、心に少し余裕が出来てきた。

「いえ、たけもとさん。私は……」

「あれ？ どうしてあたしの名前知ってるの？」

そして、出来たての余裕が速攻で崩れ去った。

（失態……！ つい、いつもの癖で……！）

どうにか誤魔化すことは出来ないかと、素早く視線を走らせる。

そして、うるかの持つ鞆に光明を見出した。

「そ、それを……！ 見た、ので……！」

鞆からはみ出していた答案用紙を指差す。

その名前欄に、『武元うるか』とバッチリ書かれていたためである。

「あ、そうなんだ？ 凄いな、もう漢字が読めるの？」

納得した様子ながらも、うるかは軽く目を丸くしている。

「べんきよう……して、いるので……」

素が出そうになるのを抑えようとする、なんとなく微妙な口調となった。

「へへ、えらいえらい」

「……………」

うるかが頭を撫でてくるのを、少々ぶすつとした表情になりながらも受け入れる。

ここで変に反発して怪しまれるのは得策ではないとの判断だ。

（答案……英語の小テストか）

現実逃避気味に、引き続きはみ出したままの答案用紙にチラリと目を向ける。

（随分と点数が伸びているようね）

うるかは、真冬が『教育係』を務めた対象ではない。だが、彼女の事情は把握している。

かつて彼女の英語の成績は壊滅的と称して差し支えないレベルだったはずだ。だがこの答

案に記入された点数は、決して悪いものではなかった。このままの調子で成績を伸ばせば、

彼女の目標にもいずれ手が届くことだろう。

（「できない」奴の味方……か）

彼女たちの現『教育係』の顔が、ふと頭の中に浮かぶ。

と、そこで。

「ところで、一人なのかな？ お母さんかお父さんは一緒にやないの？」

文乃が中腰となり、視線の高さを下げながらそう尋ねてきた。



「……あれ？」

それから、真冬の顔をまじまじと見ながら小首を傾^{かし}げる。

「い、いえ、一人よ……です」

なんとなく危機感を覚え、真冬は顔を背けながら答えた。

「おつかいか何かですか？」

次いで、理珠が尋ねてくる。

「そんなところ……です」

学園まで資料を取りに行くおつかい、と言えなくもないだろう。嘘^{うそ}はついていない。

「えらいね、どこまで行くの？」

引き続き真冬の頭を撫でながら、うるか。

「それは……」

ここで、真冬は答えあぐねた。

仮に、一ノ瀬学園に行くと正直に話せばどうなるだろう。なんとなく、彼女たちは一緒に来てしまいそうな予感がした。出来れば、あまり長い間彼女たちと接触しているのは避けたい。どこかで正体について勘づかれなくても限らないし、何よりこの状況が続くのは

心臓に悪すぎる。

そんなことを考え、沈黙してしまった真冬に対してどう思ったのか。

「ねえ、これってやつぱりさ……」

「迷子？」

「でしょうか」

三人は、顔を見合わせてそんな結論に至ってしまったようだ。

「いえ、違……」

「心配しないでっ！」

慌てて否定しようとしたところ、うるかにギョツと抱き締められた。

「あたしたちが、ちゃーんとお母さんお父さんを見つけてあげるからね！」

「お腹はすいていませんか？ うどん、食べますか？」

「そうだ、お姉ちゃんが楽しいお話ししてあげよっか？ っていつでも、わたしが今即興

で作ったやつなんだけ……」

三者三様に、気遣うような笑顔で言ってくる。

(……好意からの行動、ではあるのよね)

そう考えると、あまり無下にも出来ない真冬であった。

(とはいえ、いつまでもここで拘束されているわけにもいかないわ……)

さてどうやってこの場を脱しようか、と考える中。

「ところでお嬢ちゃん、お名前は？」

「う……」

うるかに問われ、再び答えあぐねる。

「ま……まなつ、です……」

そして、ついついそんな安直な名前を出してしまった。

「まなつちゃん、ね。あたしは、うるか！……つて、さっき名前見て知ってるのか。でも『武元さん』なんて硬い言い方じゃなくて、気軽に『うるかお姉ちゃん』って呼んでく

れていいからね」

と、うるかは邪気のない笑顔で言ってくる。

「わか……り、ました。うるか……おねーちゃん」

変に怪しまれたりしないよう、素直に言われた通り呼ぶことに。

やはり舌つ足らずで、余計に幼い印象の呼び方になってしまったが。

「私は理珠です。理珠お姉ちゃんです」

「はい、りずおねーちゃん……」

明らかに期待する目で見てくる理珠にも、そう返す。

すると、理珠はムフンとどこか満足げな表情となった。

「わたしは、文乃お姉ちゃんだよ」

「はい、ふみのおねーちゃん……」

比較的フラットな表情の文乃にも、同じく返す。

(恥辱……！ この私が、幼子のフリだなんて……！)

表面上は平静を装いつつも、内心では恥ずかしさに歯噛みする真冬であった。

「……？」

そんな中、文乃がまたも真冬の顔をじっと見ていることに気付く。

彼女は、しばしそのまま真冬の顔に視線を固定して。

「……ああ！」

「!?」

突如大きな声を出したため、真冬だけでなく理珠とうるかも若干ビクツとなった。



「つと、急に叫んじゃってごめんね。でも、ようやくわかって」
両手を合わせて謝ってから、文乃はどこかスッキリとしたような表情で再び真冬の顔へと目を向ける。

「まなつちゃん、誰かに似てると思ったら……桐須先生だよ！」

「っ!？」

ズバリ核心を突く言葉に、真冬の心臓がこれ以上なく大きく跳ねた。

「なるほど、言われてみれば確かに」

「ちっちゃい桐須先生、って感じ？」

続いて頷く理珠とうるかに、バクバクと鼓動が脈打つ。

「あつ、桐須先生っていうのはね。わたしたちの学校の先生なんだけど」

正体がバレたのかと思ったが、しかしそんな風に説明を始める文乃の様子を見るにそう
いうわけでもなさそう。真冬は密かに安堵の息を吐いた。

「わたしとritchちゃんの、教育係っていうのをやってくれた人でね。結局、それは別の
人に代わっちゃったんだけど……とつても、厳しくて……」

次いで一転、真冬の頭は急速に冷えこんで冷静さを取り戻し始める。

「冷たい人」

動揺はない。

そんな風に思われているのは、知っているから。

そんな風に思われても構わないと、接してきたから。

けれど。

だから。

「……そんな風に、前は思ってたんだけどね」

続いた言葉は思ってもみなかったもので、真冬は小さく眉根を寄せる。

前は思ってた。

過去形の語り口は、つまり今は異なるということなのか。

文乃は理珠・うるかと顔を見合わせて、お互いに小さく笑い合った。

「でも……例えば、前にわたし困ってる時に電話で助けてくれたことがあって。まあ、
どうしてわたしが困ってることを知ってたのかはわからないけど……まさか先生が助けて
くれるとは思ってなかったし、ホントに追いつめられてたから感動しちゃった」

「私も、成ゆ……とある人に言われて、改めて考えました。厳しい言い方ではありませんた



が、あれも恐らくは私たちのことを考えてくれていたからなのだろうと。それに……苦手なものがあったりと、失礼な言い方かもしれませんが人間らしいところもあるのだと知って少し安心したりもしました」

「あたしは、元々あんまり直接的に関わってたわけじゃないけど。でも、なんとなく取っ付きにくそうな人だと思ってる……でも、大会前でセンシティブになってたところにアドバイスをくれたり、文化祭でフルピュアの衣装着一緒に踊ってくれたりしてさ。勝手に抱いてたイメージと違ったから、ビックリしちゃった」

三人、それぞれそんな風に語る。

それから再度顔を見合わせて、少し照れたように笑い合った。

その傍らで、真冬はそつと自身の胸に手を当てる。

(……意外。まさか、そんな風に思われていたなんて)

つつきり、嫌われていると思っていた。

無論、今でも全面的に好かれているというわけでもないのだろう。

それでも……胸の内に、温かいものが込み上げてきたのは確かだった。

「……それにしても、見れば見るほど桐須先生によく似ていますね」

もつとも、理珠の言葉に今度は再び緊張が込み上げてくることとなったが。

眼鏡越しに興味深そうな視線を向けられ、タラリと真冬の頬を冷や汗が流れた。

「実は、桐須先生がホントに小さくなった姿だったりして」

「ろ、ろんがい！ そんなことありえないわ！」

うるかの冗談めかした言葉に、つい反射的に返してしまう。

「……なんか今の言い方、ホントに桐須先生みたいだったね」

はは、と文乃の笑みが少し引き攣り気味となった。

(は、墓穴……！)

タラタラ。真冬の頬を流れる冷や汗が増量。

三人から注目される中、真冬が選択した行動は。

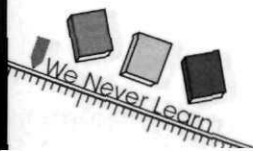
「その……しつれい、するわ！」

逃走、であった。

振り返る向きに、駆け出す……と。

「ふぎゅっ!」

すぐに、誰かにぶつかってしまった。ちょうど通りがかった人がいたらしい。



「ご、ごめんなさい……」

少し痛む鼻を押さえながら、ぶつかってしまった人を見上げる。

「ん、気をつけてな」

すると、そこにあったのもまた見知った顔であった。

（小美浪さん……!?!）

小美浪あすみ。一ノ瀬学園の卒業生であり、真冬のかつての教え子だ。

「怪我はないかい？ ………………って」

真冬の顔を見下ろすその表情に、疑問の色が浮かび。

「……まふゆセンセに、なんか似てる気がすんな」

少し間を空けて、あすみは得心したような調子で呟いた。

「ですよねですよねっ！」

テンション高めに、うるかが追従する。

「えっと、その……」

逃亡にも失敗し、真冬の脳内は焦りに満たされていた。

「し、しんせき！」

咄嗟に開いた口から、そんな単語が飛び出す。

「きりすまふゆの、しんせきだから！」

必死に言い募る真冬に、一同パチクリと目を瞬かせて。

「……あー」

それから、そんな声を上げた。

「なるほど、親戚」

ボンと手を打ちながら、文乃。

「真っ先に考えるべき可能性でしたね」

表情の変化は少ないが、理珠も納得しているようだ。

「あははっ、だねー」

うるかが、気楽げに笑う。

（不覚……最初からこう言っておけばよかったわ……）

ここまでの苦慮を思い出し、どっと徒労感に襲われる真冬であった。

「つかお前ら、こんなところで何してんだ？」

とそこで、ふと表情を改めたあすみが首を傾げる。

「まなつちゃん……その子が迷子のようなので、保護しようかと」

「ほーん？」

理珠の回答に片眉を上げてから、あすみは再び真冬を見下ろした。

「まなつちゃん、でいいのかな？」

少し柔らかくなった声色で問いかけられ、真冬はコクンと頷いた。

「まなつちゃんは、迷子なのかい？」

フルフル、今度は首を横に振る。

言葉を発さないのは、これ以上墓穴を掘らないようにという苦肉の策であった。

「迷子じゃないらしいけど？」

あすみは真冬から視線を外し、三人の方を見る。

「ありゃ？　じゃあ、わたしたちの早合点？」

コクン、文乃の言葉にも無言で頷いて返した。

「そうでしたか……それは失礼しました」

「ごめんねー、むしろおつかいの邪魔しちゃった？」

理珠が頭を下げ、うるかが苦笑と共に頬を掻く。

「……いえ」

フルフル。首を横に振ってから。

「心配してくれて、ありがとう」

三人の顔を順に見て、小さく微笑^{はなえ}んで礼を言う。

これは、本心からの言葉であった。

真冬としても、彼女たちの気遣いそのものを否定する気は少しもないのだ。

「それじゃ……私は、これで」

教え子たちにベコリと頭を下げて、踵^{かかと}を返す。

今度は、引き止められることもなかった。

「またね、まなつちゃん！」

「気をつけてね」

「お腹がすいたら、いつでも緒方うどんに来てください」

「いつてらっしゃいませ、お嬢様……ってね」

最後に一度だけ振り返ると、うるかがブンブンと手を振り、文乃がそれより随分控えめに手を動かし、理珠がどこか期待するような目で直立し、あすみがスカートの端を摘^{つま}んで



慰^{いんげん}に礼をする……そんな光景が目に入ってきた。

「……ふっ」

それがなんだかおかしくて、前に顔を向け直しながら小さく笑う。

彼女たちがこんな風に子供と接するというのも、真冬の知らなかった一面であった。

…○△X…

少女たちと別れて、しばらく。

「ふう……」

自宅と一ノ瀬学園の中間辺りにある公園のベンチで、真冬は休憩^{きゅうけい}を取っていた。

普段であればどうということもない距離だが、子供の身体で踏破^{とうは}するのは少々辛いものがある。これが本当の子供であれば疲労感などお構いなしに体力が空っぽになるまで動き回るのかもしれないが、そういうわけにもいかない。

「……けれど、ただ休憩^{きゅうけい}するというのも退屈^{たいくつ}ね」

手持ち無沙汰^{ぶさた}で、足をブラブラさせながら何とはなしに周囲を見回す。

すると、一人の女性が歩いてくる姿が目に入ってきた。

女性が、ふとした拍子に真冬の方に顔を向け……。

「っ!？」

その直前で、真冬は慌ててベンチの後ろにあった茂みの中へと飛びこんだ。

なぜなら、彼女もまた真冬の見知った人物だったからだ。

否^{いな}……見知った、どころの話ではない。

(美春……!?)

そこにいたのは、自身の妹である桐須美春だったのだから。

(危険……! 美春に見つかるのは流石にマズいわ……!)

なにせ、親戚^{すま}という言い訳が通じない。というか、まさしく子供の頃の真冬そのものを知っているのだ。正体が看破^{うか}される可能性は、他人に見られた場合と比べ物にならない。

「あら……? 事実誤認^{じじつごにん}……? 今、姉さまがいたような……?」

茂みの隙間^{すきま}から窺^{うかが}うと、美春は不思議そうに周囲を見回していた。

「確か、こっちの方に……」

キョロキョロしながら、真冬がいる茂みの方に近づいてくる。

(マズいマズいマズいマズい……！)

下手に動いて物音でも立てれば、恐らく美春はここを覗きこんでくるだろう。となれば、今の真冬に出来るのは息を潜めて美春が去るのを祈ることだけだった。

「姉さまー？　いらつしやいますかー？」

しかし残念ながら、美春は的確に真冬が隠れる茂みに向かつてきている。

(神は死んだわ……)

既に、真冬は諦めの境地に至りかけていた。

真冬のことを敬愛している妹が、今のこの姿を見ればどう思うだろうか。それも、うっかり怪しげなドリンクを飲んでしまった結果だとすれば。

何と言いつしやうかと、真冬が回転の鈍くなった頭で考えていたところ。

「あれ？　美春さん、こんなところでどうしたんですか？」

横合いから、美春に話しかける少年が現れた。

(……唯我君？)

彼もまた真冬の教え子の一人、唯我成幸である。

(不運……！　なぜ今日に限って顔見知りにはかり会うの……！?)

頭を抱えたい気分となる真冬であった。

「邂逅相遇……私は大学に行くところですが、唯我成幸さんは？」

「俺は、たまには気分を変えてと思って外で勉強してたんですよ」

「坐薪懸胆、感心ですね」

真冬の嘆きを他所に、二人はそんな会話を交わす。

「ところで、唯我成幸さん。この辺りで姉さまを見かけませんでしたか？」

再び周囲を見回しながら、美春。

「桐須先生ですか……？　俺、朝からここにいますけど見てませんよ？」

首を傾げながら、成幸は不思議そうに答える。

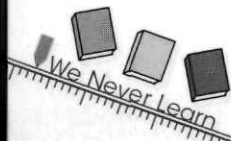
「そうですか……委細承知。姉さまの気配を感じたような気がしたのですが、どうやら気のせいだったようですね」

「気配って……」

真顔で言う美春に、成幸は軽く苦笑を浮かべていた。

「それでは、私はこれで。一念通天、受験勉強頑張ってください」

「あ、はい。どうも」



軽い挨拶^{あいさつ}を交わした後に、美春は公園から立ち去っていく。

「……ふう」

ホッと安堵の息を吐く真冬。

しかし、それも束の間のことだった。

「あのー」

「っ!？」

茂みを掻き分け話しかけてきた成幸に、身体と心臓が大きく跳ねる。

「なんか、美春さんが来た途端に隠れたみたいに見えたから一応引き止めてみたけど……あれでよかったのかな？」

「成幸は頬を掻きながら、どこか困ったような表情を浮かべている。恐らく、この状況を計りかねているのだろう。さもありなん、という感じではあった。

「ん……?」

「そこでふと、真冬の顔を見ていた成幸の表情に疑問の色が混ざる。

「もしかして、桐須先生……」

「しんせき^{桐須}! きりすまふゆのしんせき^成!」

今度もこの設定で押し通すつもりで、真冬は食い気味に叫んだ。

「あ、うん。やっぱりそうなんだね」

「どうやら、真冬が言うまでもなく成幸もそう認識していたらしいが。

むしろまた墓穴を掘ってしまったかと、少し後悔。

「あれ……? てことは、美春さんの親戚でもあるんだよな……?」

もつとも、成幸に真冬を疑う気配はなさそうだ。

顎^{あご}に指を当て、軽く眉根を寄せている。

「じゃあ、遠ざけるのはマズかったのかな……?」

「い、いえ!」

美春を連れ戻しかねない成幸の様子に、真冬は慌てて首を横に振った。

「えっと、その……いらい^伏! 今は、まふゆ……おねーちゃん、から頼まれたおつかいの最中だから! 他の親戚の人に助けられてはいけないの!」

「どうにか、この姿に相応しい言い訳を捻り出す。

「あなるほど、そうなんだ」

「幸い、成幸はすぐに信じてくれたようだ。

微笑ましげな表情を浮かべながら、膝を折る。

「君、お名前を覚えてくれるかな？」

「……まなつ」

視線の高さを合わせての問いに、ここでも結局この名前を採用することとなった。単純に、他に何も思い浮かばなかったためである。

「教えてくれてありがとう、まなつちゃん。俺は、成幸っていうんだ。唯我成幸」

成幸の言葉は、いつもより気持ちゆっくりと紡がれているように聞こえた。

（小さい子の扱いに慣れている感じがするわね……そういえば、妹さんと弟さんがいるのだったかしら……）

資料に記載されていた成幸の家族構成を思い出し、内心で納得する。

「なりゆき……お、おに……おにーちゃ……」

それから、文乃たちにしたのと同じような呼び方を試みようとする真冬だったが。

（ち、恥辱……なぜだか、さつきより数倍恥ずかしい気がするわ……！）

悶えたい気持ちで一杯となり、上手く口に出すことが出来なかった。

「……ゆいがくん」

結局、耐えきれずにいつもの呼び方を採用してしまう。

「うん、そうだよ」

成幸は特に気にした風もなく、微笑んで頷いた。

「ところで、まなつちゃん。おつかいってどこに行くんかい？」

それから、笑みを湛えたままで尋ねてくる。

「……いちのせがくえん」

一瞬迷ったものの、正直に答えることにした。単に、啾嗟に適当な場所が思い浮かばなかったから……というのもあるが。

（まあ、この子になら言ってもいいか……）

なんとなく、そんな風に思ったのである。

「一ノ瀬学園に……？」

一方、真冬の言葉を受けた成幸は首を傾げていた。

「ちなみに、おつかいって具体的にはどうするの？」

「まふゆおねーちゃんの机から、必要な資料を取ってくる」

「資料を取ってくるって……桐須先生、無茶言うなあ……」

と、成幸は苦笑を浮かべる。

「流石に、他の先生に止められちゃうと思うよ？」

「……あ」

迂闊。

その点について、真冬は完全に失念していた。

親戚を名乗ったとしても、真冬からの依頼という体を信じてもらえるかどうか。普通に考えれば、まず真冬本人に連絡を取ろうとするだろう。しかし、真冬は子供の姿でそこにいるのだから確認の取りようもない。

こうして、真冬のミッションは詰みを迎えたのであった。

…○△X…

成幸との遭遇から、少し時間が経過した後。

「助かったわ、ありがとう」

一ノ瀬学園の校門前で、真冬は成幸に向けて頭を下げた。

「はは、そんなに畏まらなくてもいいよ」

結局、資料は成幸が『桐須先生からちよつとそこで頼まれた』という体で取ってきてくれたのである。流石に自校の生徒ということで、特に疑われることもなかったらしい。それも、彼の普段からの真面目な態度あつてものだろうが。

「帰り道はわかるかい？」

「ええ、大丈夫よ」

「そっか、それじゃ気を付けて帰ってね」

軽く手を上げて、成幸は踵を返して歩き出す。

「……ふう」

その背中から視線を外しながら顔を俯け、真冬は軽く息を吐いた。

それは、無事資料を入手出来たことによる安堵の息であり……同時に、疲労からくるものでもあった。ただでさえ、子供の足ではここまで来ただけで結構な体力を消耗しているのだ。更に、知己との邂逅によって無駄に疲弊した結果であった。

（休憩……どこかでまた取らないとキツイわね……）

そう考えて、若干フラつく足を踏み出そうとしたところで。

「まなつちゃん」

名前を呼ばれて、顔を上げる。

「……ゆいがくん？」

するとそこには、真冬に背を向ける形でしゃがんでいる成幸の姿があった。

「ほら、乗って？」

なんて、さも当然のことにように真冬を促す。

「でも、そこまでしてもらうのは……」

「ははっ、子供が遠慮なんてすんなって。やつぱり、疲れてるんだろ？」

どうやら、成幸には全て見抜かれていたらしい。

真冬は一瞬、逡巡のために動きを止めて。

「……お言葉に甘えるわ」

けれど結局、素直におぶってもらうことにした。実のところ、今の状態では自宅まで帰り着けるか少々怪しいと思っていたのだ。

「よっ、と」

真冬がその肩に手をかけると、成幸は手慣れた様子で真冬の足を抱えて立ち上がる。ま

るで真冬の重さなど問題にしていなかったのかのような軽やかさだった。

（普段は頼りなさそうに見えても、こういうところは男の子ね……）

今の小さくなった身体では、尚更その背中は大きく頼り甲斐があるように感じられる。

「まなつちゃんの家、どの辺りか説明出来るかな？」

「まふゆおねーちゃんの家泊まらせてもらっているの」

今回は、サラッと言い訳を取り繕うことが出来た。

「ああ、そうなんだ。先生の家なら知ってるから大丈夫だよ」

一つ頷き、成幸は歩き始める。

しばらくの間、成幸の背に揺られて。

「かんしゃ……何から何まで世話をかけるわね」

少しの躊躇を挟んだ後、ポツリと真冬はそう口にした。

「だから、子供がそんなこと気にする必要はないって」

成幸は、笑い声と共にそう返してくる。

「にしても……こうやって顔を合わせない状態で話していると、ホントに桐須先生と話して

るみたいだなあ……」

次いでそこに苦笑の気配が混じって、真冬はギクリと顔を強張^{こわば}らせた。

（油断……いつの間にか、普段の調子で喋^{しゃべ}ってしまっていたわ……）

部屋の雑多具合を知られていることもあり、真冬は成幸の前では比較的（あくまで他の者と接するのに比べれば、であるが）自分を取り繕^{ととの}わない癖が出来ていた。それがつい、ここでも出てしまった形である。

「まなつちゃん、桐須先生のことによっぽど好きなんだね。口調まで真似^{まね}するなんて」もつとも、成幸は勝手にそんな風に解釈してくれたようだ。

「え、ええ……そうね……」

これ幸いと、乗っておくことにする。

「……………」

「……………」

それから、少しだけ沈黙の時間があつて。

「……まふゆ、おねーちゃんのこと」

ふと気が付けば、真冬は再び口を開いていた。

「君は、どう思っているの？」

続けてそんな言葉を発してから、ハッと我に返る。

（愚問^{ぐもん}……！ 私^{わたし}は、何を聞いているの……!?

自分でも、なぜこんなことを問いかけてしまったのかわからなかった。

「あつ、その、今は……」

慌てて今の質問を取り消そうとするも、上手く舌が回ってくれない。

そんなに大きな声ではなかったし、風に紛れて聞こえていないことを願った。

「桐須先生のこと……か」

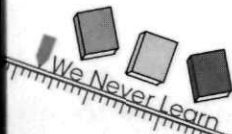
だが無情にも、成幸の耳にもバツチリ届いてしまっていたようだ。

「厳しい人、ではあると思うよ」

その発言に、胸が痛む……などといったことは、ない。

そう思われることなど百も承知で、真冬は生徒に接しているのだから。

「ただ……ああ、そうだ。先生の家に泊まってるなら知ってるよね？ 意外と抜けてるっというか、だらしないところもあって……いでっ!？ ちょっと、まなつちゃん!？ 爪が肩に食いこんでるんだけど!？」



「とはいえ、続いた大変不本意な発言は看過出来ないものであったが。」

「あははっ、ごめんごめん。大好きなお姉さんのこと悪く言われちゃ怒っちゃうよな」
再び、成幸の声に苦笑の気配が混じる。

「でも……そういうとこ含めて俺は好きだよ、あの人のこと」

「……………は？」

思ってもみなかった言葉に、真冬の脳はフリーズした。

「全てが完璧な人より、親しみが持てるし。何より……冷たい人だとか、誤解されがちなだけだよ。教え方は丁寧だし、凄く生徒のことを大切に思ってくれてるんだ。だから俺は桐須先生に感謝してるし、先生のことを尊敬してる」

けれど、続いた言葉にどうにか再び脳が動き出す。

「あ、ああ……りかい。そういう意味ね……」

「ん？ そういう意味って？」

「……しつげん。気にしないでちょうだい」

そう返すが、成幸からは不思議そうな気配が伝わってきたまま。

「そう……？ つと、着いたよ」

そこでちょうど自宅に着いたのは、真冬にとって僥倖だったと言えよう。

「たしや。色々とありがとう、ゆいがくん」

成幸の背中から降りて、真冬はベコリと頭を下げた。

「いえいえ。あ、ドア開けるよ」

真冬から鍵を受け取り、成幸がドアを開ける。

「それじゃ、ゆいがくん。また学こ……まふゆおねーちゃんのとこに遊びに来た時に」
また学校で、と言いかけて慌てて訂正。

「うん、楽しみにしてるよ」

小さく手を振る成幸と別れ、真冬は自宅へと足を踏み入れた。

「ふう……ひろろ。とにかく疲れたわ」

深い溜め息を吐き出す真冬の背後で、ドアが閉まる。

と、同時。

ドガッシャアアアアアアアン！

「むぐっ!？」

玄関先に積み重なっていたアレコレが派手な音を立てながら崩れ、真冬を強襲した。

「むーっ！ むーっ！」

結果、真冬は本やら何やらに埋まって身動きが取れなくなる。

傍から見れば、どこかで見たような光景だと思われること請け合いであろう。
ちなみにどこなのかというと、今と全く同じ場所である。

「むーっ」

ガチャッ。

どうにか脱出しようともがいていたところ、ドアが再び開く気配を感じた。

「……部屋の中、掃除してから帰るね」

と、成幸の声。

「……むー」

それに対して、真冬は唸^{うな}って返すことしか出来なかった。

…○△X…

「よし……こんなところかな」

綺麗に掃除された部屋の中を見回し、成幸は満足げに頷いた。

「じゃ……迷惑かけたわね」

「ははっ、まなつちゃんのせいじゃないだろ？」

真冬に向けて微笑む成幸だが、直後その笑みが苦笑気味に変化する。

「それに、まあ、慣れっこだしさ」

「……………」

そう言われてしまうと、真冬としてはそつと目を逸らすことしか出来なかった。

「はい、まなつちゃん。これ、飲むといいよ」

そんな真冬の前に、コップが差し出される。

「ミルクセーキ。牛乳や卵は、疲労回復にいいんだって」

コップを手にする成幸の笑みは、引き続き苦笑気味だった。

「勝手に作っちゃったけど……まあ、親戚の子に出す分だし大丈夫だよ……？」

小さくそんな風に呟いている。

真冬としてはもちろんそんなことで咎め立てるつもりなど微塵もないが、当然のことながらこの姿でそう言うわけにもいかず。

「ありがとう、いただくわ」

ただそう返すに留め、コップを受け取り口をつけた。子供用に調整してくれているのか、甘めの味付けだ。確かに、疲れた身体に染み渡っていくようだった。

「それじゃ、俺は今度こそ帰るから」

「ええ、気をつけて」

「うん、ありがとう」

ドアノブに右手をかけながら、真冬に向けて今一度小さく左手を振る成幸。

「またね、まなつちゃん」

「……ええ」

ミルクセーキ片手に、扉の向こうへと消えていくその笑みを見送って。

「……さて」

コップをテーブルの上に置いた真冬は、改めて小さくなった自分の身体を見下ろした。

「きゅうち……このまま元に戻らなかったらどうしましょう……」

そして、両手両膝を床について嫌な想像に絶望感を抱く。
と、そこで。

「……ん？」

視点が更に低くなったことで、床に置かれている箱がふと目に入ってきた。

（どこかで見たような気が……？）

眉根を寄せながら思案すれば、該当する記憶が徐々に蘇ってくる。

それは、いつかの飲み会の席。隣では、同僚の女性教諭が真冬に向けてアンチエイジングに関するマシンガントークを繰り広げていた。

そこまで思い出して、ピンと来る。

（そうだわ……これ、あの時に受け取った箱ね……！）

つまりは、この状況の元凶……かもしれない薬が入っていた箱ということである。

久しく部屋の中で見かけた記憶がなかったが、恐らくはどこかに埋もれていたのだろう。それが、先程の成幸による掃除の際に発掘されたというわけだ。

「何か元に戻るためのヒントでも見つからないかしら……」

一縷の望みをかけて、箱の蓋を開けて中を確認してみる。

そんなところまで成幸が整頓してくれたのか、二種類の瓶がその色ごとに几帳面に並べられていた。一本分空きスペースがあるのは、真冬が昨日飲んだ分ということか。

「ん……？ 二種類……？」

再び眉根を寄せて、真冬は種類の異なる瓶を一本ずつ箱から取り出した。

それぞれのラベルに記載された文字を確認してみる。

「一つは今朝確認したものと同じ、『アンチエイジング薬』。

そしてもう一つには、『アンチアンチエイジング薬』と書かれていた。

「アンチアンチ……？」

更に眉間の皺を深くし、真冬はそちらの瓶を凝視する。『アンチアンチエイジング薬』という文言の下には、少し小さくなったフォントで『アンチエイジング薬が効きすぎた場合にお飲みください』との注意書きが記載されていた。

「すいそく。これを飲めば元に戻れるということ……？」

もっとも、元に戻ると明記されているわけではない。場合によっては、今より状況が悪化するという可能性も否定は出来なかった。何より、それを試すためには今一度……今度はその怪しさを認識した上で、正体不明の液体を飲用する必要があるということだ。

「……ばくち。けれど、可能性があるのなら試してみるべきね」

しばし悩んだが、結局真冬が至った結論はそれだった。

蓋を開け……緊張に喉をゴクリと鳴らした後で、一息に中身を呷った。

「へんか……無し、かしら？」

今のところ、身体に違和感などは生じていない。

否……一つだけ。

「ふわ……」

思わずあくびが漏れる。

「ねむけ……薬を飲んだから……？」

あるいは、今日の疲れが出ただけかもしれないが……いずれにせよ、真冬は抗いがたいほどの眠気に襲われていた。

「もう、だめ……」

辛うじて、着ていた子供服を脱いで寝間着に着替える。

こちらは子供用のものを探す余裕もなく、ぶかぶかの状態だ。

「げん……かい……」

そして、昨晚と全く同じ言葉と共にベッドに倒れこむ。

やはり、夢の世界に旅立つまでに数秒も時間は要さなかった。

翌朝。

「んっ……」

朝日に^{まぶた}瞼を刺激され、真冬はゆっくりと目を開いた。

目覚めは、悪い気持ちではない。

「……何か、妙な夢を見たようね」

自身の身体が子供になる、という夢。妙にハッキリと頭の中に残っていた。
まるでそれが、現実起こったことであつたかのように。

「ふっ、論外。ありえないわね」

鼻で笑う。

そう、ありえない。

「ありえない……はずなのに。」

真冬は、綺麗に掃除された部屋の様子を見回して顔を引き攀らせた。

…○△X…

床へと脱ぎ散らかされた子供服に、空き瓶と僅かにミルクセーキが残ったコップが一つずつ載っているテーブル。テレビをつけてみれば、ニュース番組の画面端に表示される日付は休日の翌日だった。

「証拠……だと、いうの？ 現実？ あれが？」

混乱する頭に手を当て、ブツブツと呟く。

だが、いつまでもそうしているわけにもいかない。

壁の時計は、始業までそう余裕のある状況ではないことを示している。

「……考えても仕方ないわね」

頭を切り替えて、出勤の準備を始める真冬であつた。

…○△X…

いつものスーツを着こなし、校門をくぐったところで。

「昨日のまなつちゃん、可愛かったねー！」

「うん、そうだねー」

真冬より少し前を歩いていた、女子生徒たち……うるかと文乃の会話が耳に入ってきた。二人の横には理珠も並んでおり、コクコクと頷いている。

(畢竟……昨日のことは、現実だったのね……)

ここにきて、真冬も認めざるをえなかった。

こうまで証拠が重なれば、否定する方が難しいと言えよう。

「でも、眼光が鋭いっていうか……ちっちゃいのに、なんか『圧』が凄かったよね。それこそ、まるで桐須先生みたいに」

「あ、はは……」

うるかの言葉に、文乃が苦笑を浮かべた。

その横では、理珠がコクコクと頷いている。

「……始業、もうすぐよ。のんびり話していて大丈夫かしら？」

「ひゃあっ!」

声をかけると、うるかと文乃の驚きの声が重なった。

声こそ出していないが、真冬に向けられる理珠の目も丸くなっている。

「そ、そうですね! 失礼しまーす!」

ぎこちない笑みと共に、うるかは駆け足でその場を離れた。

「えっと……失礼します」

「失礼します」

文乃が苦笑のまま、理珠は……わかりづらいが、少し気まずそうな表情だろうか。それぞれ、ペコリと一礼して早足気味でうるかを追っていく。

「まったく……」

彼女たちの後ろ姿を見送りながら、真冬は腕を組んだ。その目つきは、うるかが言ったように鋭くなっている……けれど。それが、ふっと緩む。

脳裏には、昨日『まなつちゃん』と接していた彼女たちの姿が浮かんでいた。

「あれ……? 桐須先生、何か良いことでもありました? 嬉しそうですね」と、話しかけてきたのは成幸だ。

「錯覚。気のせいよ」

表情を引き締めながら、そう返し。

「そうですか……?」

「それより……昨日、『まなつ』がお世話になったようね。私からもお礼を言うわ」

小さく首を捻る成幸に、伝聞の体で改めて礼を述べる。

「いえそんな、別に大したことはしてないですし……あ、でも」

恐縮した様子を見せる成幸だが、その表情にふと微笑みが浮かんだ。

「今度まなつちゃんが遊びに来る時は、俺にも教えてくださいね」

そんな日は、決して訪れない。真冬に、二度と例の薬を飲むつもりはないのだから。

「また会おうって、約束したんで」

けれど。

「……ええ、そうね」

昨日は、散々な目に遭って……その想い自体は、今も変わらないけれど。

「その時は、また遊んであげてね」

決して、悪いことばかりが起ったわけでもなかったから。

「成幸おにーちゃん」

いたずら心で、そんな風に呼んでみる。

昨日は恥ずかしくて言えなかったのに、今度はサラッと口に出すことが出来た。

「へ……？」

「君も、そろそろ急がないと遅刻するわよ」

虚を突かれたように固まる成幸を置き去りに、真冬も歩みを再開させる。

その口元には……誰からも、見られることはなかったけれど。

小さく、微笑みが浮かべられていた。